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ABSTRACT

This document is a report on an action campaign started by members and supporters of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) to combat current and planned cuts in state support to community colleges. The action campaign includes press releases and letters to the media, local leaders, general public, and elected officials. The campaign emphasizes that community colleges provide educational opportunities to many under-served ethnic groups and communities and develop and train many skilled workers, who contribute revenue to the local and state economies, in a variety of fields. The report also states that community colleges help reduce the unemployment rate in many cities. The campaign expresses that state budget cuts in community college funding are counterproductive to the overall state economy; moreover, cuts in education make states and cities less attractive to new businesses dependent on skilled employees. The report proposes that community colleges invite elected officials and the media out to their campuses to witness directly the programs and services provided to students and the community. Other avenues and recommendations for garnering support against budget cuts like editorials, press conferences, speaking engagements, public opinion polls, and town hall meetings are mentioned in the report. (MKF)

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Local Community College Action Campaign: Combating State Budget Cuts to Community Colleges

Introduction

As you are all too well aware, the impact of the economic downturn on state budgets has been severe. Governors and state legislatures are publicly threatening and in some instances have implemented deep cuts to important state services, and institutions of higher education figure prominently on the list. And community colleges are especially vulnerable due to their dependence on state funding.

In order to help community colleges combat these cuts and recognizing the individual needs of colleges vary, we have prepared several documents to make the case against cuts to the media, local leaders, the public, and elected officials. The Action Campaign materials include:

- Developing Messages and Getting them Heard (Adobe PDF File)
- Getting Messages Out (PDF format)
- Building Your Story (PDF format)
- Pitching Your Point of View (PDF format)
- Coalition Building (PDF format)

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DEVELOPING MESSAGES & GETTING THEM HEARD

This Action Memorandum provides key messages and suggestions for communications vehicles to the media, public, and political leaders. In order to successfully block or minimize cuts to community college budgets, you must focus attention on the role and importance of community colleges to local and state economies during times of economic distress.

Messages

The Centennial Media Guide* provided last year by AACC contained a thoughtful discussion of what messages are and how they are used, and we suggest you review that information for a basic description of developing messages for a media effort. *(The Centennial Media Guide can be accessed on-line at the AACC homepage through the Resource Center and selecting Info Planning Tools.)

The messages we recommend for a state budget initiative are crafted to highlight the fundamental role that community colleges play in training and retraining workers and how this is especially critical during an economic downturn. In other words, this is not the time for educational jargon or celebrations of what community colleges have accomplished, but for continual emphasis on state legislators' and the public's self-interest.

In addition, be mindful of the overall budget implications triggered by the current recession. States are proposing cuts to many popular and important public programs and services. Therefore, you need to acknowledge that cuts may be necessary, but they should be balanced and not undermine the ability of community colleges to respond to the current economic challenges.

The following are the messages we recommend you use to support a campaign to preserve state funding:

- **Core message.** Community colleges are the most essential and efficient providers of the skilled workers (our state) needs....we're the solution to skills shortages in law enforcement, health care, information technology and social services.

- **Economic downturn.** Now with rising unemployment, community colleges provide even more value, as they retrain displaced workers cost-effectively and in a timely response to the job market.

- **Cuts are counterproductive.** Slashing community college funding would be counterproductive, moving a state's economy backwards, and lessening the chances of attracting new business dependent on skilled employees.

- **Serving special populations.** Community colleges provide opportunities for students from families that cannot afford the skyrocketing cost of four-year institutions; even many public four-year

universities are now out of reach for students and families of modest means. Budget cuts to community colleges disproportionately penalize working and middle-class students, as well as families transitioning from welfare.

We emphasize that these are general messages developed to be of use to every community college facing severe cuts in funding. To flesh these messages out, you should immediately research specific statistics or anecdotes to back up these statements, e.g.:

- Data on retraining programs, particularly those that have enrolled numerous workers laid off because of plant closings, dot-com failures or other events.
- Information about any innovative curricula that provide training in specialist areas....e.g. fire fighting programs or certificate/degree programs for biohazard specialists.
- Demographic data on your student body, demonstrating that your institution serves students of different ages, income and ethnic backgrounds.
- And, **most important,** examples and/or data projections on what a severe budget cost will mean to your institution: crowded classrooms, teacher layoffs, program cuts, underserved communities and tuition hikes.

GETTING YOUR MESSAGES HEARD

In order to wage a successful legislative media campaign, it's critical to establish yourself as a "player" early on. Holding a press conference at or shortly after the beginning of the legislative session, in coordination with other affected community colleges is an excellent "first shot over the bow" that establishes your presence with appropriate media and with your target audiences.

One press event, however, will not provide the long-term influence you need. As the budget process unfolds, you will need to creatively reiterate your issue, utilizing a variety of tactics, including:

- **Pitching different parts of the newspaper.** If the education reporter or state government reporter covers your initial press event, well and good. How do you achieve additional coverage in the same paper?

  Look at your messages again. Is your state suffering a shortage of nurses? Most are. How many nurses and other health care professionals are you graduating, and what jobs are they doing in the community? The health care reporter may want to know.

  Likewise, think about your curricula and what your graduates are doing. Law enforcement? Big newspapers have police reporters. Childcare

workers? Almost every newspaper has a parents-and-family beat. Do you have a large minority enrollment? Most newspapers, and even TV stations, have reporters specifically tasked with covering minority issues.

- **College tours.** It's important to make a direct connection to the media and politicians, to establish an understanding of what is stake over prospective budget cuts. An effective way to accomplish this is to organize a tour of your community college, highlighting the students served, classes offered, and how the budget cuts would directly impact your institution. This is a hands-on way to illustrate your school's vital role in the local community and the consequences of budget cuts.

- **Editorial boards.** Politicians are keenly aware of the editorial positions of major newspapers in their city, county or state. Most editorial boards will meet with the president(s) of local community colleges. Presidents need to be well-prepared, not just with the right message, but with the facts and figures, especially concerning the impact of proposed cuts on the mission of their institutions.

- **Op-eds.** Even with a favorable editorial in the daily paper, you have an opportunity to make your own case – in 750 words or less. Again, community college presidents have enough stature in the community to potentially command space in the newspaper, but you can also consider bylines by successful graduates, or by the head of a large company, hospital or government agency that employs your former students. Good op-eds stick to message, but also tell one or two anecdotes about real people, and the real-life situation engendered by political decisions.

- **Speaking engagements.** Your local high schools have PTA meetings....how many of their grads will end up at your college? Your hospitals have nurses' unions, and they have meetings, too. The local chapters of the NAACP, La Raza, native American groups, and other minority advocacy groups have regular meetings, and your college may be the best if not only opportunity in your area for low-income minorities to get higher education. Providing speakers to these groups as often as possible is in your interest, especially if you provide your listeners with generic postcards, e-mails or letters to send to their legislators.

- **Host an event for community leaders.** Invite community and business leaders whom you know have a stake in the success of your college, and provide a short program outlining the current legislative emergency. Provide invitees with a small kit of activities they can undertake on your behalf, from calling the governor's educational advisor, to e-mailing their union memberships about the funding crisis.

- **Town hall meeting.** This is an opportunity to bring your students and graduates, faculty and other stakeholders together. Invite the media, and limit the program to two or three really good

speakers that will demonstrate your community college's determination to continue serving the community. Again, have postcards, petitions or other communications vehicles easily available for signing and sending.

- **Public opinion poll.** Consider joining with other community colleges in your state to fund a poll that will demonstrate public support for low-cost higher education. A short poll (10-15 questions) of state residents should cost about $25,000 with a sample size of 800 people. Release the poll at another news conference, to provide tangible evidence to the media and state officials of public support. ■

GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT

The Centennial Media Guide* provides you with the basic tenets of a media outreach program. There is much useful information, including types of media, deadlines, guidelines for written material and event planning, in that guide. *(The Centennial Media Guide can be accessed on-line at the AACC homepage through the Resource Center and selecting Info Planning Tools.)

What you most need to know, is how to adapt a media outreach program to the special exigencies of a public affairs campaign.

Audiences. In protecting the state funding for your community college, you need to give careful thought to the audiences for your effort. They include:

- **The governor and his/her staff.** Particularly liaisons to the higher education community.
- **State legislators.** Particularly state representatives and senators from your home district and surrounding districts that are home to students your institution serves.
- **The employer community.** Who hires your graduates? Hospitals, law enforcement and other local government agencies, big corporations….all have their own memberships, unions, spokespeople and ways of reaching out to state government – and all are extremely useful spokespeople for you.
- **Your students and faculty.** As a matter of institutional morale, they, of course, want to see that you are doing what you can to preserve the financial health of your college. As important, they can be your most effective ambassadors and spokespeople about the worth of your institution, and many have their own connections to groups with influence in your state capital.
- **Parents of students.** Although many community college students are young adults in their twenties and thirties, some are still dependent on their parents for support and tuition payments. Those parents can be mobilized to contact their state legislatures on behalf of your institution, particularly if budget cuts will necessitate a tuition increase.

Timeline. State legislatures are currently back into session. Although some states will not get to a final budget until spring or summer, be assured that the budget machinations – allotting a shrinking pie to many needy contenders – begin almost immediately. Find out the timeline for budget decisions in your state, and identify two or three crucial decision-making dates…..e.g. the first budget hearings of the appropriate committee, the date the governor submits his/her own budget, the beginning of budget debate by either or both houses of the legislature, the final vote.

You want to ensure that the voice of your college, as well as other colleges threatened by cutbacks, is heard at each and every appropriate point in the process.

Spokespeople. As soon as possible, you will need to identify appropriate spokespeople for your institution's media and community outreach efforts and have contact information for them instantly available. Appropriate spokespeople can include:

- **College president, academic provost, or other senior official.** Since your spokesperson may have to be available on short notice to talk to a reporter or address a community meeting, it is wise to have more than one senior spokesperson familiar with the issues and messages to speak for the institution.

- **Student and faculty leaders.** Often, the media prefer a "front-line" spokesperson – the person actually teaching a class, or the displaced worker training for a new degree.

- **Third-party spokespeople.** Sometimes, the best voice that can be raised on your behalf is not your own. After identifying and building a coalition of supporters (see coalition-building, below) you can recruit one or more persuasive spokespeople to represent your point of view, such as an employer. ■

BUILDING YOUR STORY

One press event, no matter how successful, will not provide the long-term influence you need. As the budget process unfolds, you will need to creatively reiterate your issue, utilizing a variety of tactics, including:

- **Pitching different parts of the newspaper.** If the education reporter or state government reporter covers your initial press event, well and good. How do you achieve additional coverage in the same paper?

  Look at your messages again. Is your state suffering a shortage of nurses? Most are. How many nurses and other health care professionals are you graduating, and what jobs are they doing in the community? The health care reporter may want to know.Likewise, think about your curricula and what your graduates are doing. Law enforcement? Big newspapers have police reporters. Childcare workers? Almost every newspaper has a parent's-and-family beat. Do you have a large minority enrollment? Most newspapers, and even TV stations, have reporters specifically tasked with covering minority issues.

  In every instance, make sure that you end up with a story that makes the point about funding, at least indirectly. Be very straightforward with the reporter, and make sure he understands that this 'success story' represents many other students whose education is threatened by imminent budget cuts.

- **College tours.** It's important to make a direct connection to the media and politicians, to establish an understanding of what is at stake over prospective budget cuts. An effective way to accomplish this is to organize a tour of your community college, highlighting the students served, classes offered, and how the budget cuts would directly impact your institution. This is a hands-on way to illustrate your school's vital role in the local community and the consequences of budget cuts.

- **Editorial boards.** Politicians are keenly aware of the editorial positions of major newspapers in their city, county or state. Although not even The New York Times has the clout to get its legislative wish-list passed into law, editorial positions on matters like state funding often remind legislators that powerful people are paying attention on a particular issue. Beyond that, the media's tendency to 'feed' from each other may give coverage in one medium added reach.

  Most editorial boards will be happy to meet with the president(s) of local community colleges. Presidents need to be well-prepared, not just with the right messages but with the facts and figures, especially concerning the impact of proposed cuts

on the mission of their institutions. Most editorial boards allot an hour or less to these meetings, so succinct statements, leaving plenty of time for questions and answers, are best. As a drill, have your spokesperson identify and support five top priorities.

- **Op-eds.** Even with a favorable editorial in the daily paper, you have an opportunity to make your own case – in 750 words or less. Again, community college presidents have enough stature in the community to potentially command space in the newspaper, but you can also consider bylines by successful graduates, or by the head of a large company, hospital or government agency that employs your former students. Good op-eds stick to message, but also tell one or two anecdotes about real people, and the real-life situation engendered by political decisions. Op-eds should be submitted to local newspapers at least a week, and preferably two, before you would like them to appear.

- **Speaking engagements.** Your local high schools have PTA meetings....how many of their grads will end up at your college? Your hospitals have nurses' unions, and they have meetings, too. The local chapters of the NAACP, La Raza, native American groups, and other minority advocacy groups have regular meetings, and your college may be the best if not only opportunity in your area for low-income minorities to get higher education.

Providing speakers to these groups as often as possible is in your interest, especially if you provide your listeners with generic postcards, e-mails or letters to send to their legislators, opposing specific budget cuts to your community college. It is well worth the time to assign one staffer to the task of exploring and arranging speaking engagements for college officials for the duration of the budget process....again, the best voice raised to support your cause may not be your own. ■

PITCHING YOUR POINT OF VIEW

Generally, in beginning a legislative media campaign, you first need to determine how to let your target audiences know that you will be taking an active role in the process....in other words, establishing yourself as a"player" early on.

Often, this means a press conference held at or shortly after the beginning of the legislative session. If, in coordination with other affected community colleges, you can organize this type of press event, it is an excellent "first shot over the bow" that establishes your presence with appropriate media and with your target audiences.

A press conference should:

- Be held in a location very close to – or ideally in – the state capitol, to ensure coverage from state political and governmen: reporters. The outside steps or rotundas of state capitols are popular venues; so are hotel conference rooms a short walking distance from the capitol.

- Timed for the media's convenience....i.e. not when there are important hearings or other events the reporters need to cover. This means looking b oth at the legislative schedule and at the wire service daybooks about a week ahead of time to attempt to avoid conflicts. Mornings and early afternoons are best; Fridays are to be avoided, if possible.

- Ideally, feature between three and five speakers, each with something special to say. In other words, even if five community colleges are sponsoring the press event, it's dull for the media to hear five college presidents in a row. (The non-speaking college presidents would be available for Q&A.) A student, a faculty member, an employer, a leader of a minority group well-represented among your student body, a successful graduate....all are potential speakers for a press event.

- One overall message. Just one: our community colleges are vitally necessary for our state and cannot afford even a small cut in funding.

The Centennial Media Guide provides how-tos for media advisories, press releases and other materials you will need. It can be accessed on-line at the AACC homepage through the Resource Center and selecting Info Planning Tools.

Remember, as you embark on a press conference or any other media effort, that your typical media list will probably not suffice for this effort. You will need to identify and build relationships with the reporters who cover the state capitol and state budget process, no matter where in the state you are located. While you still need to contact education reporters, often budget issues are covered by political reporters, who may not be familiar with your college or issues.

This is also true for local TV. Most big local TV stations – i.e. network affiliates in major cities – have reporters in the state capitol to cover the issues there. In addition to acquainting yourself with the assignment desk and reporters in your city who cover education or local institutions, make sure you reach out to the lonely reporter stationed in Harrisburg, Albany, Sacramento or Columbus. Chances are that he or she is the person who will at least contribute to the local television coverage of your issue. ■

COALITION BUILDING

You may already have a leadership team in place comprising allies in other institutions. Now is the time to take advantage of any partnerships you have with the business community, local politicians, other education advocates or social service agencies to make the case for your college's financial needs.

On some issues it's nice to have quiet friends. This is not one of them. State legislators and governors need to hear from your allies – and the more powerful and influential they are, the better. That means that you should provide them with materials that they can adapt to support you, including:

- Generic letters or e-mails that they can send to their own state legislators.
- Fact sheets that succinctly make the numbers case for your college.
- Any positive media coverage about your college, including any recent articles you've achieved on the budget issue.

But you may need to reach out and broaden your coalition. Consider the following activities to increase the number and visibility of your allies:

- **Host an event for community leaders.** A dinner, cocktail reception, or lunch is worthwhile. Invite community and business leaders whom you know have a stake in the success of your college, and provide a short program outlining the current legislative emergency. Provide invitees with a small kit of activities they can undertake on your behalf, from calling the governor's educational advisor, to e-mailing their union memberships about the funding crisis.
- **Take advantage of other groups' events.** In addition to providing speakers, a booth, table or exhibition at events ranging from neighborhood street fairs to ethnic pride day parades will call attention to your issue and garner assistance. In other public venues, keep your request very easy…i.e. "Please fill out this postcard and sign your name and we'll send it to the governor for you."
- **Hold a town-hall meeting,** for your students and graduates, faculty and other stakeholders. Invite the media, and limit the program to two or three really good speakers that will demonstrate your community college's determination to continue serving the community. Again, have postcards, petitions or other communications vehicles easily available for signing and sending.
- **Develop an e-mail chain for activists.** E-mail bypasses the postage and printing expense of direct mail, and is easier to get up and running. Consult your IT department for strategies on capturing e-mail addresses of stakeholders; make sure you keep them updated on latest developments and use the e-mail

chain itself to send messages to players in the budget debate.

- **Consider joining with other community colleges** in your state to fund a poll that will demonstrate public support for low-cost higher education. A short poll (10-15 questions) of state residents should cost about $25,000 with a sample size of 800 people. Release the poll at another news conference, to provide tangible evidence to the media and state officials of public support.

- **Celebrities,** whether of the magnitude of the Michael Jordan variety or of the local-boy-made-millionaire variety, are very useful spokespeople. If you have a celebrity graduate of your college, now is the time to ask him or her to participate in a press event, or even attend a meeting in the state capitol with your president and other allies to make your case. Don't restrict your thinking to star athletes and actors: successful businesspeople, and honored policeman, firefighter, or nurse politicians, scientists, authors and activists are celebrities, too, and may be very happy to lend their name to an educational institution that helped them when they were young and unknown.

The overall directive here is to think creatively. There are many stakeholders in the health and success of community colleges; find them, woo them, and work with them to persuade your state representatives that budget cuts to community colleges are shortsighted and unfair to your students and to the public at large. ■

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